

CL 99-96

Club "99"



MEDTA
MEI-FIGNER
SOPRANO 1859-1952

MEDEA MEI-FIGNER

Photo Courtesy *ROGER GROSSU.S.A.*

MEDEA MEI-FIGNER.

By J. DENNIS.

The records of this illustrious singer have a particular fascination for the collector, both for their excellence as examples of her art and for their rarity. Considering that the G. & T. series was made in 1900 by the acid engraving process on zinc, before the days of wax for discs, they are remarkably fine and forward; also they belong to that famous Russian series which were the first records to bear the red celebrity labels.

Medea Mei was born in Florence, I am unable to state when. "Bauer" gives the date as 1859 and this was confirmed to Mr. Moyer in U.S.A. by the Library of Congress, but its accuracy is doubtful. Both her daughter and M'sieur J. R. Richard, to whom I am indebted for supplying information with which to check this article, state that Medea Mei made her debut at the early age of 16 in

1883, which would make her present age about 82, which seems more likely, especially as, at least until recently, she occasionally gave instruction to pupils.

As a girl she studied in Florence with Panofka and Bianchi and Carlotta Zucchi. Her debut was as Azucena in *Trovatore* in a festival performance given near same city. Though always known as a soprano she had a wide range and in addition to singing many of the famous dramatic soprano roles (later including Wagnerian) she also sang mezzo parts.

After singing in Italy, Spain, Central Europe and South America, she went to Russia and it was in that country she made most of her career. She made her debut in St. Petersburg in 1887 where she met

Nicolai Figner and later married him. He was lyric tenor at the Imperial Opera there and also in 1900 recorded for celebrity G. & T. a number of solos as well as the duets with his wife.

Her St. Petersburg debut was early in the year, as after returning to Italy to study Eugene Onegin she later the same year, 1887, made her only English appearances, in Lago's season at Covent Garden. Nicolai was also engaged for this season. She sang Leonora in La Favorita with Gayarre and D'Andrade and though accepted as a good artiste apparently made no great impression on the public or critics and after her performance was heard here no more. I have not been able to trace that she ever sang in North America. In 1903 she toured South America in company with Caruso.

Otherwise her career was mainly in Russia. In 1889 she sang for the first time in Russian, the role being

Tatiana in Eugene Onegin. The following year Tchaikowsky visited Mei-Figner at Florence and there wrote the score of "The Queen of Spades" it is said in six weeks. The Figners created parts at the first performance in St. Petersburg in December the same year. "Iolanthe," a lyric one act opera was Tchaikowsky's last work for the stage, written in 1892, and was first performed, shortly after his death, in St. Petersburg, December, 1893, Medea created the part of the blind princess, a fine soprano role.

In 1895 the pair created roles in Napravnik's "Doubrowski." Napravnik was for fifty years first conductor at the St. Petersburg Opera House, the Maryinsky Theatre taking up the post in 1869 and staged several important revivals, one in 1897 being Tchaikowsky's "The Oprichnik," again starring Medea Mei-Figner. She continued to study Italian roles, Boheme under the composer himself and first sang

Mimi in 1900. About this time too, she commenced singing Wagnerian parts. In November, 1902 she created a leading part in Napravnik's fourth opera "Francesca da Rimini," as also did her husband. She continued singing leading roles at the important Russian houses until with her farewell performance, as Carmen, she quitted the operatic stage after 25 years' service with the Imperial Theatre, still in full possession of her powers and to the disappointment of her countless Russian admirers.

It would leave a gap to quit without mentioning her husband, Nicolai Figner, the two worked always together. Collectors do not award him as important a place in their galaxy as his wife, but they had equally great reputations in Russia. The records show him to be a lyric tenor with a refined manner, but white in quality. He was an admirable Don Jose and his wife excellent, probably at her best, as



MEDEA MEI-FIGNER AND NICOLAI FIGNER
Photo Courtesy *ROGER GROSS* U.S.A.

Carmen. But his great importance lies in the number of roles he created. Apart from Napravnik's third opera "Doubrowski," from which he later recorded a solo as well as the duet with his wife, it was as the creator of Lenski in Eugene

Onegin and Hermann in The Queen of Spades, that he made his mark in Russian operatic history. Together too, they created roles on Napravnik's fourth work "Francesca da Rimini," already referred to, unfortunately not recording at all from these last three works.

By the turn of the century his powers were on the wane and Leonid Sobinoff had taken his position as the leading Russian lyric tenor. Nicolai's records therefore are not examples of his voice in its prime.



THE RECORDS.

PATHE CYLINDER 1899-1900 ST. PETERSBURG.

24081	Serenade (unidentified)	...	...	<i>Meyer-Helmund.</i>
	G & T.	1900-1,	ST.	PETERSBURG.
23122	Souvenir...	...	...	<i>Tosti.</i>
23123	The Night	...	...	<i>Rubenstein.</i>
23124	Werther: Tears		...	<i>Massenet.</i>
23125	Carmen: Gypsy Song	...	...	<i>Bizet.</i>
23131	Carmen: The Habanera	...	...	<i>Bizet.</i>
23132	Night, Love and the Moon	...	...	<i>Davidoff.</i>
23133	Fior che Langue	...	...	<i>Rotoli.</i>
23134	Tosca: Vissi d'arte	...	...	<i>Puccini.</i>
23135	The Queen of Spades: Air of Lisa		...	<i>Tchaikowsky.</i>
23146	Harold: Lullaby	...	...	<i>Nappravnik.</i>

DUETS WITH NICOLAI FIGNER.

24057	(Le) Crucifix ...	...	...	...	<i>Faure.</i>
24058	You tempt me so	...	...	...	<i>Glinka.</i>
24059	The Sea Gull's Cry	...	...	...	<i>Grodski.</i>
24060	Mefistofele: Far, far away...	...	...	...	<i>Boito.</i>
24061	Doubrowski: French duet...	...	...	...	<i>Naprovnik.</i>



Contrary to the Gramophone Company's later well established practice of indicating the language used by the first figure (2 for Russian) all the series are not sung in that language. Those known to be in Russian I have indicated above in English. the remainder in the language used. M. Richard also informs me that Mei-Figner made a test record for Fonotipia in Milan, 1904, title is unknown. This may explain the relegation of at least some of her G. & T. titles to black label, as the same happened to other singers who changed from G. & T. to another company. The black label

records are double sided and are on what I only know as "Amour" records. The labels are very similar in appearance to a black concert dog, except that in place of the picture of the dog there is one, in colour, of the inscribing angel. All lettering is in Russian, the original single sided numbers are still used.

Assuming the records were made in two sessions, the playing speeds seem to be 75 r.p.m. for both. Whilst it is difficult to ascertain the speed at which the items were sung, the alteration of a line of Carmen's to suit Mei-Figner's voice make it unlikely

that she would both transpose and alter, which gives a reliable key to work on.

I have not been fortunate enough to hear all the records and envy the man who has. The Lullaby from Harold is a beautiful light piece in melancholy vein ending with a long note showing remarkable breath

control, much superior to Nezhdanowa's though on this recording I like the violin accompaniment. The two Carmen excerpts, if unorthodox, are striking, well sung and show the singer had her own ideas on interpretation. The Night is a very fine example of her powers in interpreting a song.

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QUALITON IMPORTS LTD.

24-02 40th Avenue

Long Island City, NY 11101

MATRINDUSTRIA



MEDTA MEI-FIGNER

SOPRANO 1859-1952

Sung in Russian except where otherwise specified. Acoustic G & T recordings (winter 1901/2) except for two 1903 Pathe selections (), two 1904 Columbias (**), and two electric recordings (1929) issued by the Soviet Music Trust (***)*

- | | | | |
|--|--------|---|--------|
| 1. Penso (Tosti) lt. | 3' 32" | 13. CARMEN (Bizet): Habanera | 3' 14" |
| 2. Night (Rubinstein) | 3' 01" | 14. Chanson boheme | 2' 07" |
| 3. WERTHER (Massenet): Air des larmes | 2' 14" | 15. Night, love, moon (Davidov) | 1' 52" |
| 4. Fior che langue (Rotoli) lt. | 3' 19" | 16. HAROLD (Napravnik): | |
| 5. TOSCA (Puccini): Vissi d'arte (lt.) | 3' 00" | Cradle song 23146X 3652 | 2' 55" |
| 6. PIQUE DAME (Tchaikowsky): Air de Lisa | 3' 23" | 17. * CARMEN (Bizet): Seguidilla | 1' 56" |
| 7. Le crucifix (J. B. Faure)-with N. FIGNER (ten.) | 3' 05" | 18. *In the morning, I bring you violets | |
| 8. You tempt me needlessly | | (Meyer-Helmund) | 2' 16" |
| (Glinka)-with N. FIGNER | 2' 52" | 19. ** MEFISTOFELE (Boito): | |
| 9. Sea gull's cry (Grodsky)-with N. FIGNER (ten.) | 2' 14" | L'altra notte | 3' 49" |
| 10. DUBROVSKY (Nappravnik): | | 20. ** DUBROVSKY (Nappravnik): | |
| French duet-with N. FIGNER | 3' 00" | Masha's Air | 3' 07" |
| 11. HAROLD (Nappravnik): | | 21. *** Canta il grillo (Billi) lt. | 3' 03" |
| Cradle song 23146 436X | 2' 49" | 22. *** Stornellatrice (Respighi)-from | |
| 12. MEFISTOFELE (Boito): | | RE ENZO (lt.) | 1' 35" |
| Lontano-with N. FIGNER | 2' 54" | T. T.: 61' 42" | |

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COMPACT
disc
DIGITAL AUDIO

MADE IN HUNGARY
BY GLORIA

CL 99-96

(P)

1989

AAD

MEDEA MEI-FIGNER

1. PENSO 2. NIGHT 3. WERTHER 4. FIOR CHE LANGUE 5. TOSCA
6. PIQUE DAME 7. LE CRUCIFIX 8. YOU TEMPT ME NEEDLESSLY
9. SEA GULL'S CRY 10. DUBROVSKY 11. HAROLD
12. MEFIstofELE 13. CARMEN 14. CHANSON BOHEME
15. NIGHT, LOVE, MOON 16. HAROLD 17. *CARMEN
18. *IN THE MORNING, I BRING YOU VIOLETS
19. **MEFIstofELE 20. **DUBROVSKY
21. ***CANTA IL GRILLO
22. ***STORNELLATRICE